



Lesson 1

THE WAY OF THE PSALMS

This lesson aims to point out the way of the Psalms: to set forth the basic background that will help us dig into the riches of these worship poems. The lesson looks longer than it is! One of the goals is to do a lot of paging through the Psalms in order to become acquainted with the book as a whole before we focus on parts of it.

DAY ONE—THE PSALTER’S SHAPE AND BACKGROUND

To prepare for a study of the Psalms, let us first see the shape and background of the whole book—which is divided into five separate books. Drawing a parallel with the five books in the law of Moses (often called the Pentateuch), some have called the Psalms “the Pentateuch of David.”

- I. What do you observe in the concluding verses of each of the five books?
 - Psalm 41:13

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- Psalm 72:18–20

- Psalm 89:52

- Psalm 106:48

- Psalm 150:6

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2. Psalms written by David make up the majority of Books I, II, and V—nearly half the Psalter. Other psalms, both within and without the Psalter, surely were written by him as well. What do we know about David from the following passages?

a. 1 Samuel 16:11–23

b. 2 Samuel 23:1–7

c. 1 Chronicles 6:31–48

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3. What do the superscriptions of various psalms tell us concerning other authors and various contexts of the Psalms? Comment on the introductory text notes of the psalms listed below.

Helpful facts:

- *The sons of Korah and Asaph were from the tribe of Levi, in charge of tabernacle, and later temple, care and worship activities.*
- *The “maskil” and the “miktam” were probably musical compositions used in worship.*
- *Some of the unidentified words may be names of tunes.*
- *A “song of ascents” was probably sung in a procession of worshipers walking up to the temple in Jerusalem, the city built high on Mount Zion.*
- *“Selah,” a Hebrew word interspersed throughout the Psalter, may have musical or liturgical significance.*

a. Psalm 45

b. Psalm 67

c. Psalm 70

d. Psalm 75

e. Psalm 90

f. Psalms 120–134

DAY TWO—THE PSALTER’S POETRY

To appreciate the way the Psalms were written, it is necessary to use a translation that presents their poetry in discernible lines. Hebrew poetry’s central characteristic is its balancing of lines (or units of thought) in a structure often called parallelism. Most often, two (or sometimes three) “parallel lines” balance together to create meaning. For each of the three generally accepted kinds of parallelism explained below, look through the first several chapters of Psalms and try to find a couple more examples.

1. *Synonymous parallelism*—The second line basically repeats the idea of the first line, in different words (thus adding new shades of meaning).

a. Psalm 3:1

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b.

c.

2. *Antithetic parallelism*—The second line presents a contrasting idea.

a. Psalm 18:27

b.

c.

3. *Synthetic parallelism*—The second line continues or adds to the meaning of the first.

a. Psalm 7:10

b.

c.

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Even in this exercise, we see that the categories are not always hard and fast. However, the general structure of parallelism appears consistently in the Psalms' poetry. To look for the method and beauty of this structure helps the reader take in this part of God's Word most effectively. How wonderful that, in God's good providence, this parallelism is quite easily captured in translation. The nuances of sound and rhythm are not, but the main characteristic is. We can get close to what the writers—and the Lord!—intended.

Another characteristic of this poetry involves *imagery*, the pictures that lead us to understand God's truth imaginatively and deeply. As we study, let us prepare to note, muse on, and take in the imagery that God inspired in the Psalms.

4. For a start, as we consider imagery, read Psalm I, chosen to introduce the Psalter. This psalm sets forth two kinds of people, two paths with two different ends, based on two different relationships to God's law. What two main *similes* (comparisons using "like" or "as") picture these two kinds of people?

5. Briefly, how do these pictures deepen our understanding of the psalm's meaning?

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DAY THREE—THE PSALTER'S
BREADTH AND DEPTH

The Psalms reach out and touch just about every imaginable human emotion or expression. In general, from a brief look at the beginning verses of the following psalms, what different kinds of situations and/or expressions can you observe?

- Psalm 4
- Psalm 9
- Psalm 13
- Psalm 15
- Psalm 19
- Psalm 20
- Psalm 21

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- Psalm 30
- Psalm 33
- Psalm 37
- Psalm 51
- Psalm 59
- Psalm 67
- Psalm 96
- Psalm 137

And that's only a glimpse! One can understand why both individual believers and worshiping bodies have regularly used the whole progression of psalms to express all their praise, petitions, questionings, thanksgiving, confession, trust, etc., before a God who is worthy of and sufficient for every expression.

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DAY FOUR—THE PSALTER’S SAVIOR

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible presents one unified story about God redeeming a people for himself, through the Lord Jesus Christ. If Jesus is the crux of the story, how does he shine through in the book of Psalms?

For each of the following, read first the verses from the Psalms, then read the New Testament verses, and then summarize briefly how you see Jesus shining through the psalm.

1. Psalm 2:1–6 (cf. John 1:41, 49; 18:36–37; Acts 4:23–27)

Note: the Greek word Christ and the Hebrew word Messiah both mean literally “the Anointed One.”

2. Psalm 2:7–12 (cf. Matt. 3:16–17; Acts 13:32–33; Heb. 1:1–5)

3. Psalm 22:1–18 (cf. Matt. 27:32–46)

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How amazing to glimpse the ways God inspired the psalmists to write of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one who came as a suffering servant to die for us, the eternal King who reigns on the throne of David, and the one who comes to judge the world. Let us be watchful for Jesus shining through the Psalms as we read and study them.

DAY FIVE—CONCLUSIONS

Having finished this lesson, we have finished only a brief introduction to the Psalms. Having completed the whole study, we will have met only a representative selection of psalms. Let us pray that this study will help lead us into a lifetime of rich communion with God through the Psalms.

To conclude—and to begin!—reread Psalm I, which stands at the beginning of the Psalter like an open gate inviting us to enter and follow the way of the righteous who delight in God's law—not the way that leads to destruction. The Psalms will help lead us in the right way, following God's law and God's people who have gone before. Having reread Psalm I, write your own prayer based on it.